



# Censorship, A Comparative View: France, 1789- East Germany, 1989

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## Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789 – East Germany, 1989

THE TROUBLE with the history of censorship is that it looks so simple: it pits the children of light against the children of darkness; it suffers from Manichaeism—and understandably so, because who can take a sympathetic view of someone who defaces a text with a blue pencil or a film with scissors? For my part, I would not want to impugn the tradition that leads from Milton and Locke to the Bill of Rights. But we need to understand censorship, not merely to deplore it; and to understand it we need to put it in perspective. In this essay I examine censorship from a comparative perspective, watching it at work under two old regimes: first a regime that ended two centuries ago in France; then a regime that ended only yesterday, in East Germany.

I will limit my discussion to the censorship of books and begin by considering an ordinary, quite typical book from eighteenth-century France, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique* by Jean Baptiste Labat.<sup>1</sup> For clues about the character of publishing under the authoritarian system established by Louis XIV, one can begin with its title page (fig. 1). It goes on and on, more like a dust jacket than a title page of a modern book. In fact, its function was similar to that of dust-jacket copy: it summarized and advertised the contents of the book for anyone who might be interested in reading it. The missing element, at least for the modern reader, is equally striking: the name of the author. It simply does not appear. Not that the author tried to hide his identity: his name shows up in the front matter. But the person who really had to answer for the book, the man who carried the legal and financial responsibility for it, stands out prominently at the bottom of the page, along with his address: “in Paris, the rue Saint Jacques, the shop of Pierre-François Giffart, near the rue des Mathurins, at the image of Saint Theresa.”<sup>2</sup> Since 1275, booksellers had been subjected to the authority of the university and therefore had to keep shop in the Latin Quarter. They especially congregated in the rue Saint Jacques, where their wrought-iron signs (hence “at the image of Saint Theresa”) swung through the air like the branches of a forest. The brotherhood of printers and booksellers, dedicated to Saint John the Evangelist, met in the church of the Mathurin Fathers in the rue des Mathurins near the Sorbonne. So this book’s address placed it at the heart of the official trade, and its superlegal status was clear in any case from the formula printed at the bottom: “with approbation and privilege of the king.”

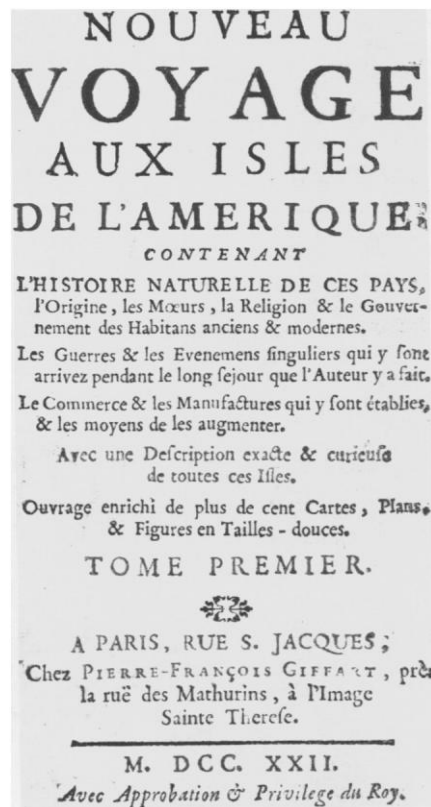


FIGURE 1.

Here we encounter the phenomenon of censorship, because approbations were formal sanctions delivered by royal censors. In this case there are four approbations, all printed at the beginning of the book and written by the censors who had approved the manuscript. For example, one censor, a professor at the Sorbonne, remarked in his approbation: "I had pleasure in reading it; it is full of fascinating things." Another, who was a professor of botany and medicine, stressed the book's usefulness for travelers, merchants, and students of natural history; and he especially praised its style. A third censor, a theologian, simply attested that the book was a good read. He could not put it down, because it inspired in the reader "that sweet but avid curiosity that makes us want to continue further." Is this the language you expect from a censor? To quote the question that Erving Goffman sets as the starting point of all sociological investigation: What is going on here?

The beginning of an answer can be found in the privilege itself, which is

concis de ces Memoires attireront sans doute l'approbation de ceux qui ont connoissance du Pais, & donneront à d'autres l'envie d'en connoître la verité en faisant le même voyage. Rien n'est donc si nécessaire au Public que l'impression de cet Ouvrage. A Paris ce 4. Octobre 1719.

BESNIER.

APPROBATION DE M.  
l'Abbé RAGUET.

J'AY lû par l'ordre de Monseigneur le Chancelier *less Memoires des nouveaux Voyages aux Isles de l'Amerique, par le P. Labat, de l'Ordre de S. Dominique*: & ils m'ont paru dignes de la curiosité du Public. Fait à Paris le premier Septembre 1721.

RAGUET.

PRIVILEGE DU ROY.

LOUIS par la grace de Dieu Roi de France & de Navarre: A nos amez & feaux Conseillers les Genstenans nos Cours de Parlemens, Maitres des Requestes ordinaires de nostre Hôtel, Grand Conseil, Prevost de Paris, Baillifs, Sénéchaux, leurs Lieutenans Civils, & autres nos Justiciers qu'il appartiendra, SALUT. Nostre bien amé le P. Jean-Baptiste Labat, Missionnaire de l'Ordre des FF. Prêcheurs, Nous ayant fait remontrer qu'il souhaite

roit faire imprimer un Ouvrage de la composition, qui a pour titre: *Memoires faits aux Isles Françoises de l'Amerique*, & qu'il desiroit donner au Public, s'il nous plaisoit lui accorder nos Lettres de Privilege sur ce necessaires: A CES CAUSES, voulant favorablement traiter l'Exposant, Nous lui avons permis & permettons par ces Presentes de faire imprimer lesdits Memoires ci-dessus expliquez, en tels volumes, forme, marge, caracteres, conjointement ou separément, & autant de fois que bon lui semblera, & de les faire vendre & debiter par tout nostre Royaume pendant le temps de neuf années consecutives, à compter du jour de la date desdites Presentes. Faisons défenses à toutes sortes de personnes, de quelque qualité & condition qu'elles soient, d'en introduire d'impression étrangere dans aucun lieu de nostre Obéissance: comme aussi à tous Libraires & Imprimeurs, & autres, d'imprimer, faire imprimer, vendre, faire vendre, debiter, ni contrefaire lesdits Memoires ci-dessus specifiez, en tout ni en partie, ni d'en faire aucuns Extraits, sous quelque pretexte que ce soit, d'augmentation, correction, changement de titre, ou autrement, sans la permission expresse & par écrit dudit Exposant, ou de ceux qui auront droit de lui, à peine de confiscation des Exemplaires contrefaits, de quinze cent livres d'amende contre chacun des contrevenans, dont un tiers à Nous, un tiers à l'Hôtel-Dieu de Paris, l'autre tiers audit Exposant, & de tous dépens, dommages & interets; à la charge que ces Presentes seront enregistrées tout

FIGURE 2.

printed after the approbations. It takes the form of a letter from the king to the officials of his courts, notifying them that, as a grace, the king has granted the author of the book the exclusive right to reproduce it (fig. 2). The privilege is a long and complex text, full of stipulations about the physical qualities of the book. It was to be printed on "good paper and in beautiful type, in conformity with the regulations on the book trade." Those regulations set detailed standards of quality control: the paper was to be made from a certain grade of rags; the type was to be calibrated so that one *m* would be precisely as wide as three *ls*. It was pure Colbertism, originally devised under the direction of Jean Baptiste Colbert himself. And the privilege concluded as all royal edicts do: "For such is our pleasure." Legally, the book existed by virtue of the king's pleasure; it was a product of the royal "grace." The word *grâce* recurs in all the key edicts on the book trade; and in fact the Direction de la librairie, or bureaucracy in charge of the trade, was divided into two parts: the "Librairie contentieuse" (for regulating conflicts)

l'original. Commandons au premier nostre Huissier ou Sergent de faire pour l'exécution d'icelles tous Actes requis & nécessaires, sans demander autre permission, & nonobstant clameur de Haro, Charte Normande & Lettres à ce contraire, **CARTEL EST NOSTRE PLAISIR.** Donné à Paris le vingt-sixième jour du mois de Janvier l'an de grace mille sept cent vingt, & de nostre Regne le cinquième.

Par le Roi en son Conseil.  
**DE S. HILAIRE.**

Il est ordonné par Edit du Roi du mois d'Aoust 1686. & Arrest de son Conseil, que les Livres dont l'impression le permet par Privilege de Sa Majesté, ne pourront être vendus que par un Libraire ou Imprimeurs.

*Registré sur le Registre IV. de la Communauté des Libraires & Imprimeurs de Paris, pag. 557. N° 556. conformément aux Reglemens, & notamment à l'Arrest du Conseil du 13. Aoust 1703, à Paris le 3 Février 1720.*

**DE LAULNE, Syndic.**

Je confesse avoir cédé à Mrs Giffart & Cavelier fils, Marchands Libraires à Paris, mon present Privilege, pour en jouir par eux & ayans cause pour toujours en mon lieu

lieu & place. Fait à Paris ce 21. Mars 1720.  
**F. J. B. LABAT, de l'Ordre des FF. Prêcheurs.**

*Registré sur le Registre IV. de la Communauté des Libraires & Imprimeurs de Paris, pag. 595. conformément aux Reglemens, & notamment à l'Arrest du Conseil du 13. Aoust 1703. à Paris le 17. Mai 1720.*

Lesdits Sieurs Cavelier fils & Giffart ont fait part pour chacun un quart à Mrs Guillaume Cavelier pere & Theodore le Gras.

FIGURE 3.

and the “Librairie gracieuse” (for what we would today call copyright). Finally, after the text of the privilege came a series of paragraphs stating that the privilege had been entered in the registers of the booksellers’ guild and that it had been divided into portions, which had been sold to four different booksellers (fig. 3).

Now, to the modern eye, all this looks rather strange: we have censors praising the style and readability of the book instead of cutting out its heresies; we have the king conferring his grace upon it; and we have the members of the booksellers’ guild dividing up that grace and selling it as if it were a form of property. What indeed was going on?

One way to make sense of it is to think of the eighteenth-century book as something comparable to the jars of jam and boxes of biscuits in England that seem so curious to Americans because they exist “by special appointment to her Majesty the Queen.” The book was a quality product; it had a royal sanction; and in dispensing that sanction, the censors vouched for its general excellence. Cen-

sorship was not simply a matter of purging heresies. It was *positive*—a royal endorsement of the book and an official invitation to read it.

The governing term in this system was “privilege” (etymologically, “private law”). In fact, privilege was the organizing principle of the Old Regime in general, not only in France but throughout most of Europe. Law did not fall equally on everyone: it was a special dispensation accorded to particular individuals or groups by tradition and the grace of the king. In the publishing industry, privilege operated at three levels: the book itself was privileged (the modern idea of copyright did not yet exist); the bookseller was privileged (as a member of a guild, he enjoyed the exclusive right to engage in the book trade); and the guild was privileged (as a corporation it enjoyed certain exclusive rights, notably exemption from taxation). In short, the Bourbon monarchy developed an elaborate system for channeling the power of the printed word; and as a product of that system, the book epitomized the entire regime.

Such were the formal characteristics of the typographical Old Regime. How does the system look if one studies its operation behind the facades of title pages and privileges? Fortunately, three large registers in the Bibliothèque nationale provide a rich supply of information about how censors performed their tasks in the 1750s. Dozens of their letters and reports to the director of the book trade, C. G. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, reveal their reasons for accepting or rejecting manuscripts. The acceptances often read like the approbations printed in the books. Thus a typical recommendation for a privilege: “I have read, by order of Monseigneur le chancelier, the *Letters of M. de la Rivière*. They seem to me well written and full of reasonable and edifying reflections.”<sup>3</sup> The rejections offer a fuller view of the censors’ reasoning; and like the approbations, they concern the quality of the work as much as its ideological content. One censor condemns the “light and bantering tone” of a treatise on cosmology.<sup>4</sup> Another has no theological objections to a biography of the prophet Mohammed but finds it superficial and inadequately researched.<sup>5</sup> A third refuses a mathematical textbook because it does not work through problems in sufficient detail and fails to give the cubes as well as the squares of certain sums.<sup>6</sup> An account of the campaigns of Frederick II offends a fourth censor, not because of any disrespectful discussion of French foreign policy but rather because “it is a compilation without taste and without discernment.”<sup>7</sup> And a fifth rejects a defense of religious orthodoxy against the attacks of freethinkers primarily on aesthetic grounds:

It is not a book at all. You cannot tell what the author’s purpose is until you have finished it. He advances in one direction, then doubles back; his arguments are often weak and superficial; his style, in an attempt to be lively, merely becomes petulant. . . . In the effort to turn a pretty phrase, he frequently looks silly and ridiculous.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the reports also contain plenty of comments condemning unorthodox ideas. The censors certainly defended the Church and king. But they

worked from the assumption that an approbation was a positive endorsement of a work and that a privilege conveyed the sanction of the crown. They wrote as men of letters themselves, concerned to defend “the honor of French literature,” as one of them put it.<sup>9</sup> So they often adopted a superior tone, as if they were a Boileau or a Saint-Simon, pouring scorn on works that failed to measure up to standards set in the Grand Siècle. “The subject is frivolous, and this basic flaw is not offset by any fine detail,” explained a censor in rejecting the manuscript of a novel. “I find only insipid moralizing interspersed with ordinary adventures, vapid bantering, colorless descriptions, and trivial reflections. . . . Such a work is not worthy of appearing with a public mark of approbation.”<sup>10</sup>

This style of censorship created a problem: if manuscripts had to be not merely inoffensive but also worthy of a Louis-quatorzean stamp of approval, would not most literature fail to qualify? The censor of the above-mentioned novel chose a conventional way around this difficulty:

Because [this work], despite its faults and mediocrity, contains nothing dangerous nor reprehensible and does not, after all, attack religion, morality, or the state, I think that there is no risk in tolerating its printing and that it can be published with a tacit permission, although the public will hardly be flattered by a present of this sort.<sup>11</sup>

In short, the regime created loopholes in the legal system. “Tacit permissions,” “simple permissions,” “tolerances,” “permissions of the police”—the ministers in charge of the book trade devised a whole series of categories which could be used to permit books to appear without receiving an official endorsement. Given the nature of the privilege system, they could not do otherwise, unless they wanted to declare war on most of contemporary literature. As Malesherbes put it in reflecting on his years as director of the book trade, “A man who read only books that originally appeared with the explicit sanction of the government, as the law prescribes, would be behind his contemporaries by nearly a century.”<sup>12</sup> Malesherbes even turned a blind eye to many of the blatantly illegal works that were printed outside the kingdom and that circulated inside through clandestine channels. Thanks to this sort of flexibility, the system accommodated itself to change and the Enlightenment was possible.

Exactly how the Enlightenment penetrated the cracks in the system and spread through French society is a long and complex story. Without recounting it in detail, I would make one point: it was not simply a story that pitted liberty against oppression but rather one of complicity and collaboration. From the beginning of preventive censorship in 1642, the number of censors kept increasing. There were about 10 in 1660, 60 in 1700, 120 in 1760, and 180 in 1789. By 1770 they processed about one thousand manuscripts a year, and their refusal rate was low: 10 to 30 percent of the works submitted. (But of course anyone with a truly dangerous work did not attempt to get it through the censorship and went directly to the underground publishers.)<sup>13</sup>

The system's flexibility and laxity was due not merely to its loopholes and escape clauses but to a growing complicity between censors and authors. They came from the same milieu. Indeed, most censors were authors themselves—for example, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon and his son Claude, Alexis Piron, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, and Jean Baptiste Suard. Far from being bureaucrats, they did not even receive a salary and generally supported themselves by working as professors, tutors, librarians, and secretaries. They often knew the authors whose texts they censored, and the authors often managed to get censored by their friends. Voltaire sent his requests for censors directly to the *garde des sceaux* and the head of the police. Malesherbes, the director of the book trade, gave Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert* to d'Alembert himself for approval. Malesherbes also arranged for an underground French edition of Rousseau's *Émile*, going so far as to approve provisions in the contract; and he virtually acted as Rousseau's agent in the publication of *La nouvelle Héloïse*. Piquet, the censor for *La nouvelle Héloïse*, required only twenty-three changes in the text, most of them quite minor. Only two concerned serious heresies, and Malesherbes turned a blind eye to an unexpurgated text that was imported from Amsterdam. In fact, the greatest threat to the Enlightenment came from the Church, not the state. Bowing to religious pressures, Malesherbes had the privilege for the *Encyclopédie* revoked; but he saved the book by secretly protecting Diderot and the publishers.<sup>14</sup>

The growing leniency produced scandals. Best known were the censor's endorsement of a translation of the Koran as a work that contained "nothing contrary to the Christian religion"<sup>15</sup> and the affair of *De l'esprit*, an anti-Christian metaphysical treatise by Claude Adrien Helvétius. Helvétius used his contacts in Versailles to get a sympathetic censor, Jean-Pierre Tercier, the first secretary in the foreign ministry and a minor man of letters, who did some censoring on the side but knew nothing about metaphysics. Tercier received the pages of the manuscript in small batches and out of order, so he could not follow the argument. At a dinner party, Mme Helvétius, a great beauty, turned her full charm on him and persuaded him to hurry things up so that her husband could give the manuscript to the printer before they left for a holiday at their country estate. When it came to approving the proofs, Tercier, whose main concern was France's foreign policy at the height of the Seven Years' War, initialed all the sheets at once without really reading them. Then, as soon as the book appeared, the enemies of the philosophes produced a tremendous outcry: here was bold-faced atheism appearing with a royal privilege. The book was condemned and burned by the Parlement of Paris. Helvétius had to disown it. Tercier was fired. And the text reappeared as a best-seller in the underground trade.<sup>16</sup>

It would be possible to produce enough anecdotes of this kind to suggest that the administrators of the Old Regime allowed a de facto liberty of the press. But one can also cite enough horror stories to prove the opposite: booksellers were



branded and sent to the galleys; lives were ruined in the Bastille. The Bastille was no torture house, but it was not a three-star hotel either, as some historians believe. About one thousand persons connected with the book trade were imprisoned there between 1659 and 1789, and about three hundred of them were writers. Voltaire was sent there twice, for a total of eleven months. As a consequence, he spent most of his life in exile. After being shut up in the dungeon of Vincennes, Diderot abandoned the idea of publishing some of his most important works, such as *Le neveu de Rameau*. The Bastille was more than a symbol. It was a powerful deterrent, and it contributed to a variety of self-censorship that was all the more insidious for being internalized.

I would conclude with a contradiction. The Old Regime in France was both humane and brutal. When the king first discovered that the invention of movable type could shake his throne, he tried to solve the problem by decreeing in an edict of 1535 that anyone who printed a book would be hanged. That did not work, nor did an edict of 1757 that threatened to punish any author of irreligious or seditious works with death. The system remained relentlessly repressive, in principle. In practice, it became increasingly flexible, thanks to enlightened administrators who bent the rules and, by doing so, created enough room in an archaic structure to accommodate a great deal of modern literature—at least until it all came crashing down in 1789.

Let us now leap over two centuries and consider East Germany (the GDR) in 1989. A glimpse at the title page of another typical publication, *Dichtungen und Fragmente*, a collection of essays by Novalis, makes it clear that we are dealing with a different literary system, one which did not make open statements about the exercise of censorship. In fact, censorship was forbidden by the constitution of the GDR. So to see how it functioned, one must go behind the facades of books and constitutions and interrogate the people who made the system work.

Fortunately, those people remained at their posts in a state of suspended administration for a few months between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of the two Germanies. Thanks to an introduction from a friend in a Leipzig publishing house, I got to know two of them, Hans-Jürgen Wesener and Christina Horn; and they were willing to talk. In fact, they gave me a tour of their office at 90 Clara-Zetkin Strasse, just two blocks east of the Wall, and they explained the way it operated.

The censors did not care for the term “censorship.” It sounded too negative, Frau Horn explained. Their office was actually called the “Head Administration for Publishing and the Book Trade,” and their principal concern, as they defined it, was to make literature happen—that is, to oversee the process by which ideas became books and books reached readers. In the early 1960s, Frau Horn and Herr Wesener had graduated from the Humboldt University with advanced

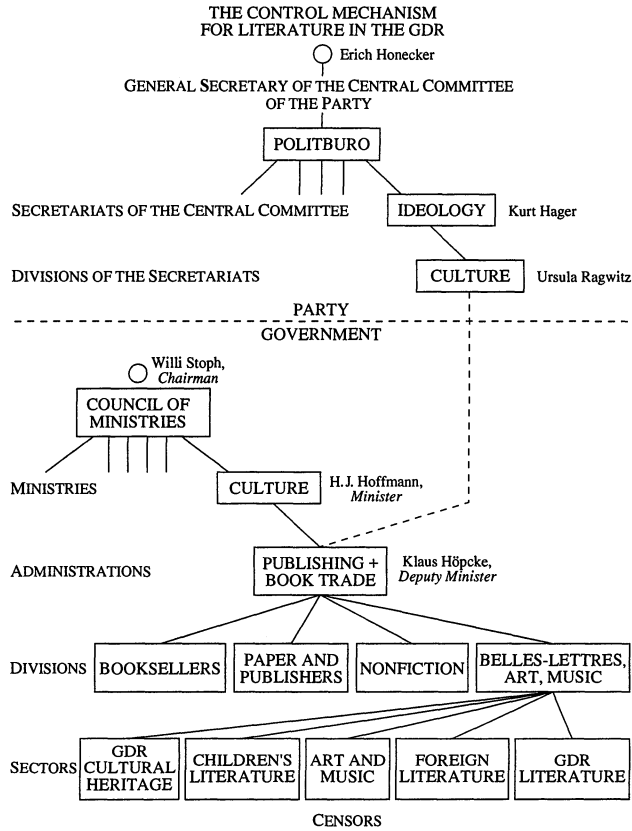


FIGURE 4.

degrees in German literature. They took jobs in the Ministry of Culture and soon afterward were assigned to the Publishing and Book Trade Administration, where they rose through the ranks of the sectors of GDR and foreign literature.

It took some time for me to get a clear picture of the bureaucracy's organization, because at first I saw only corridors and closed doors, all of them the same—plain brown with nothing but a number on the outside. East German fiction was number 215, forty doors down a mustard-yellow hallway on the second floor of a building that seemed to go on forever, twisting and winding around a central courtyard. In fact, the bureaucracy was ordered in hierarchical segments: sectors, divisions, administrations, and ministries located under the government or Council of Ministries. And the whole structure was subordinated to the Communist Party, which had a hierarchy of its own: divisions led to secretariats of the Central Committee and ultimately to the Politburo under Erich Honecker, the supreme power in the GDR (fig. 4).<sup>17</sup>

# Themenplan 1990

## Literatur der DDR

### I. Neue Werke

Irmgard A b e Oben links, wo die Schürze winkt	Eulenspiegel Verlag 15 000 Geschichten / cell.Papp.
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In diesem neuen Geschichtenbuch der Autorin begegnet der Leser alten Bekannten wieder wie Herrn und Frau Weise, Walter und allen jenen, deren Lebensglück durch Mißverständnisse verhindert oder gefördert wird.

Sonja A n d e r s Zwischen Himmel und Hölle (AT)	Buchverlag Der Morgen 15 000 Lebensbericht
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Sonja Anders, 32 Jahre alt, verheiratet, Mutter von zwei Kindern, wird mit schweren Entzugerserscheinungen in eine psychiatrische Klinik eingeliefert. Doch die diagnostizierte Alkohol- und Tablettenabhängigkeit ist nur ein Symptom, ist Ausdruck einer Beziehungsstörung zu sich selbst, zu ihrer Mutter, zu anderen Menschen, zum Leben.

Gunter A n t r a k Zwei Mörder (AT)	Das Neue Berlin 100 000 Krimi / DIE-Reihe
--	---

Ein Mord ist geschehen. Die Fahndung der K hat schnell Erfolg. Der Mörder gesteht. Da meldet sich ein alter Mann und behauptet, er sei der Mörder. Oberleutnant Dirksen und seinem Team scheint es unmöglich, nur einem der beiden die Tat zu beweisen. Neben der Ermittlungshandlung werden Hintergründe für Fehlverhalten deutlich gemacht.

Ingeborg A r l t Um der Liebe willen	Aufbau-Verlag 15 000
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In dem sorgfältig recherchierten zweiten Buch der Autorin, dessen Handlung im Dreißigjährigen Krieg spielt, ist die Historie nicht Zierrat, sondern Fundament, um das Wesentliche - wie Menschen miteinander umgehen - zu begreifen.

Edmund A u e Reise zum Dalmatinischen Archipel	Militärverlag 10 000 Tagebuch-Erz.
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Ein Mann reist an die Adriaküste, um das Grab seines Vaters zu suchen. Unvermutet wird er mit der Vergangenheit konfrontiert, hat Begegnungen mit Menschen, die seinen Vater gekannt haben, erfährt, daß dieser als Partisan an der Seite jugoslawischer Genossen gekämpft hat.

FIGURE 5.

How all this functioned would be explained to me shortly. When I first arrived, Frau Horn and Herr Wesener seemed eager to demonstrate that they were university people like myself, not faceless bureaucrats and certainly not Stalinists. The top people in the office sometimes came from outside the bureaucracy, they explained. A division chief might have been the director of a publishing house, the editor of a journal, or an official in the Authors' League. Literature was an interlocking system that spanned many institutions, and different literary circles often intersected. They themselves might eventually make lateral transfers into journals or publishing firms, because all were run by the Communist Party, and they had always been loyal Party members.

Of course loyalty had its limits. Both Herr Wesener and Frau Horn had joined the massive demonstration of 4 November 1989, which had precipitated the collapse of the Politburo and the opening of the Wall. They identified with the reformers inside the Party and even with dissident authors like Christoph Hein

and Volker Braun, whose works they had helped to censor. They favored “socialism with a human face,” the “third way” between the Soviet and the American systems. And yet they *regretted* the fall of the Wall.

I realized that a great deal of self-justification went into this self-description. No one wanted to appear as an apparatchik in June 1990, when we had our conversation. But why did they defend the Wall? Herr Wesener surprised me with his answer: the Wall had helped to make the GDR a “Leseland,” a country of readers, he explained. It had kept out the corruption of consumer culture. Once breached, it could not withstand the schlock—the sex books, exercise manuals, and sleazy romances—that was sure to flood the GDR. Schlock came from the West; it was the main product of the literary system on the other side of the Wall, for we, too, had censorship: it was exerted through the pressure of the market.

Feeling somewhat cornered, I then asked what exactly was censorship as he had practiced it. Herr Wesener answered with a single word: “Planning.” In a socialist system, he explained, literature was planned like everything else, and to demonstrate the point, he handed me a remarkable document entitled “Subject Plan 1990: Literature of the GDR.” It was a seventy-eight-page overview of all the fiction scheduled to be published in 1990, a literary year that never happened (fig. 5).

As Herr Wesener let me keep the copy of the plan, I later studied it in detail. To my surprise, I found it flat and businesslike in tone. It listed all the projected books alphabetically, according to the last names of their authors. Each entry contained the title of the work, the publisher, proposed press run, in some cases the genre or series in which it would appear, and a short description of its contents.

After reading the descriptions, I wondered whether East German literature might have contained more schlock than Herr Wesener admitted. The year’s output of 202 new titles (in fiction and belles lettres, not counting reprints) was to include a great many love stories, detective thrillers, historical romances, war novels, westerns, and science fiction adventures (called “utopian novels” in the lingo of the censors). Of course one cannot assess their literary qualities without reading them; and that is impossible, because most of them were scrapped, along with the censorship, as soon as the year began. But the one-paragraph blurbs accompanying each title in the plan suggest something like socialist kitsch. Thus *The Burden of Closeness* by Erika Paschke:

While Ina Scheidt travels from country to country pursuing her demanding career as a translator, her mother and her seventeen-year-old daughter Marja become increasingly upset at having to keep the household going by themselves. One day, Ina brings a man home with her, and complications develop in the three-way relationships of the family. The man recognizes Ina’s excessive concern with external values and turns away from her. In this as in her other novellas, the author is concerned with ethical questions of domestic

Themenpleneinschätzung 1989

Literatur der DDR

Auf der Grundlage der Orientierungen des XI. Parteitages sowie in Auswertung der Beratungsergebnisse des X. Schriftstellerkongresses der DDR ist die Zusammenarbeit von Autoren und Verlagen auf neue literarische Werke gerichtet, die zur Verständigung über Hauptfragen gegenwärtigen Lebens beitragen, die für die Stärkung des Sozialismus und die Sicherung des Friedens wirken.

Mit einem Planangebot von 625 Titeln in 11.508.950 Expl. (255 BA / 4.991.100 Expl.; 370 NA / 6.617.850 Expl.) werden von den Verlagen alle Möglichkeiten für die Herausgabe von DDR-Literatur wahrgenommen.

Plan 1988: 559 Titel in 10.444.000 Expl.  
203 BA / 4.460.000 Expl.  
356 NA / 5.984.000 Expl.

Das Planangebot für 1989 wird bestimmt durch Titel, die anlässlich des 40. Jahrestages der Gründung der DDR Geschichte und Gegenwart des ersten sozialistischen deutschen Staates in vielfältigen literarischen Formen widerspiegeln. Daran sind eine Reihe namhafter Autoren beteiligt. Zugleich ist wie bereits im Vorjahr festzustellen, daß immer mehr Autoren der mittleren und jüngeren Schriftstellergeneration das Planangebot bestimmen und einen wesentlichen Beitrag zur Literatur der DDR leisten.

Unter thematischen und literarischen Gesichtspunkten werden Erwartungen gesetzt insbesondere in folgende Vorhaben:

life. She sets off notions of human worth and mutual respect against the lack of understanding for others.

This sounds surprisingly soap-operatic, and certainly far removed from socialist realism or the stern stuff that one would expect from the so-called land of workers and peasants. But East Germany was also known as a *Nischengesellschaft*, a society in which people withdrew into private life; so novels that moralized about personal relationships may have seemed appropriate to the literary planners, especially if they warned readers against travel—that is, against exposure to the blandishments of the West.

While the literature plan was being prepared, thousands of East Germans were escaping to West Germany, and the entire GDR spent most of its evenings watching West German television. Perhaps then it was no coincidence that several

of the projected novels set family dramas within the context of relations between the two German states. Wolfgang Kroeber's *Somewhere in Europe* was to confront "a current problem: why people leave their country." *I Hear a Way* by Rita Kuczynski was to tell the story of Suschen and her family in both halves of a divided Berlin. Kurt Nowak's *Signs of Separation* was to trace a family history on both sides of the German-German border. And *The Late Mail* by Lothar Guenther was to show how a young worker makes a heroic choice between a draft notice and an invitation to join his father in the West, which arrive in the same mail delivery.

Although it does not contain much strident propaganda, the plan adheres relentlessly to political correctness, East German style. When lovers kiss and make up, they pay tribute to the deeper quality of personal relationships in a system free from the superficialities of consumerism. When Indians fight off invaders in the Dakotas or Amazonia, they strike blows against imperialism. Fighting itself remains resolutely antifascistic, even in science fiction. *The Threat* by Arne Sjoeborg was to recount the overthrow of a "Führer," who had seized power on the planet Palmyra, by manufacturing a false alarm about an impending catastrophe. And detective stories served as vehicles for exposing the pathology of capitalist societies. Thus, *The Whispering of a Dress* by Wolfgang Kohrt would explore the whole range of criminality in America in order to lay bare "the emptiness of relations between the sexes, the outrages of daily life, the desire for revenge, the lust for money, speculation on inheritances, and unfulfilled longings."

All these stories had a further subtext, or rather another text altogether, a *Themenplaneinschätzung* or ideological report that went with each year's plan to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. This document was as remarkable as the plan itself, so I was especially grateful to receive a copy, marked "confidential," from Herr Wesener (fig. 6). The one he gave me had been approved by the Central Committee in mid-1988 and covered the plan for 1989, the last literary year of the East German old regime. In it, one can see the censors making their case for the coming crop of books to the bosses of the Communist Party, and one can hear the unmistakable accent of the state bureaucracy. Socialism is advancing everywhere; everything is pointing onward and upward; production is expanding: 625 titles were scheduled to be published, a total of 11,508,950 copies, representing a significant advance on the previous plan (559 titles, totaling 10,444,000 copies).

Nineteen eighty-nine was to be a year of celebration for forty glorious years of socialist rule in East Germany. Therefore the literature of 1989 would be dedicated above all to the past and present of the GDR as they had been defined by Comrade Erich Honecker: "Our party and our people stand in a revolutionary and humanistic tradition of centuries of struggle for social progress, liberty, and the rights and value of mankind." Then, in language loaded down with similar pieties of GDR-speak, the report surveyed the main themes of the plan. Thus, for example, it stressed that the year's output of historical novels would express

“energetic antifascism,” while novels set in the present would conform to the principle of socialist realism and would promote the “historical mission of the working class in the struggle for social progress.” The authors of the plan confessed that they had failed to produce an adequate supply of stories about factory workers and tractor drivers, but they would compensate by publishing anthologies of older proletarian literature. Aside from this deficiency, everything was good and getting better. The report did not mention the slightest indication of dissension. On the contrary, it indicated that authors, publishers, and officials all had their shoulders to the wheel, pushing literature to new heights at the very moment when the whole system was about to come crashing down.

It seems strange now to read this testimony of ideological purity and institutional health from the inner workings of a regime that was about to crash. Was all this paperwork merely an apparatchik fantasy, something that filled the “in” and “out” boxes of the bureaucracy but had little to do with the actual experience of literature among ordinary East Germans?

Herr Wesener and Frau Horn assured me that the plan really did determine the production and consumption of books in the GDR. They then described every stage in the system, a long, complicated process that involved negotiating proposals for books with authors, editors, and a special committee of representatives from bookstores, libraries, the academic world, and the Authors’ League. Two stages in that process were critical for the fate of a book: the first occurred when the censors submitted their plan to the ideologists keeping watch over them from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the second when the censors finally received a finished text and went over it with a blue pencil.

As Herr Wesener and Frau Horn described it, the first hurdle was the worst. They cast themselves as friends of literature, as the crucial middlemen who brought books into being by incorporating them into a plan that would get by the philistines in the Central Committee: fifteen hard-bitten ideologues in the committee’s “Culture Division” working under a dragon lady named Ursula Ragwitz. Every year, the censors’ boss, Klaus Höpcke, would march over to “Culture” with their plan under his arm and do battle with Frau Ragwitz. When he returned, he could only say what “Culture” had allowed and what it had rejected. There were no explanations, no refusals in writing. Then Herr Wesener had to relay the refusals to the heads of the publishing houses, who would pass them on to the authors; and he could say nothing more than that it was a fiat from above: “Das ist so.”

Still, there were ways around the philistines in “Culture.” Had I not noticed all the empty slots in the plan for 1990? There were forty-one of them following the 202 entries for new works of fiction. Höpcke’s people could fill those slots with relatively “hot” books. Of course they had to get permission from Culture, but that came more easily on an ad hoc basis than in a formal meeting in which the members of Frau Ragwitz’s group would try to outdo one another in dem-

onstrating their militancy. Also, had I noticed that the plan contained more entries for reprints (315) than for new titles (202)? That was where they put the “hottest” items—books by East German authors that had appeared in West Germany, caused some fuss (but not for the censorship office), and that could be published (as inconspicuously as possible and usually in small press runs) in the GDR once things had quieted down.

Provided they kept their criticism implicit and wrapped in a protective cover of irony, Höpcke was willing to let a few books of this sort seep through the bureaucracy and into the body politic. He took so many chances, in fact, that he became something of a hero, not only to his subordinates in the censorship office, whom he always protected, but also to some of the publishers and writers whom I met in East Germany. They described him as a hard-boiled, hard-line journalist who took over the Administration of Publishing and the Book Trade in 1973 with the worst possible ideas about imposing order on intellectual life. But the more time he spent battling the Party bureaucracy, the more sympathy he developed for independent-minded authors. By the 1980s, he had become an expert at slipping unorthodox books past the Central Committee. Two of them, *Die neue Herrlichkeit* by Günter de Bruyn and *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* by Volker Braun, caused such a scandal within the Party that they nearly cost him his job. Someone within the Central Committee denounced *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* in particular as an “intellectual bomb.” Höpcke was called on the carpet and given a formal censure. He managed nonetheless to hold on to his position by taking the blame and bending with the wind. And a few years later, at a meeting of the East German PEN organization in February 1989, he supported a resolution condemning the arrest of Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia.

The second crucial step in the process of censorship took place after the plan had been approved and the books written. At that point, a text would arrive in the office of Frau Horn and Herr Wesener, and they had to go over every word in it. They insisted that they wielded their blue pencils lightly, because most of the effective censorship had already occurred—in the planning process and in the authors’ heads. Frau Horn said that she and the five censors working under her typically rejected only about seven of the 200 to 250 works of GDR fiction that they vetted every year.

She had learned to identify certain “allergies” of the Central Committee members, so she always struck out words that might touch off a hostile reaction—for example, “ecology” (a taboo noun: it was associated with the massive, state-produced pollution in the GDR) and “critical” (a taboo adjective: it evoked dissidents, who were to be buried in silence). References to Stalinism were so inimical that she would change “opponent of Stalinism” to “contradictor of his time”; and she even replaced “the 1930s” with a safer, vaguer expression: “the first half of the twentieth century.” A decade ago, everything concerning the United States was sensitive. They had great difficulty in getting a translation of *The Catcher in*



the Rye past Kurt Hager, the chief of ideology in the Central Committee, because Hager considered Holden Caulfield “a bad role model for our GDR youth.” But after Gorbachev’s advent in 1985, the *Soviet Union* became the most delicate subject in Frau Horn’s office, and the censors had to be especially wary of anything identified with “SU Lit,” as Soviet writing was known in their in-house jargon.

Once a text had cleared this final hurdle, it received a printing authorization. Herr Wesener showed me one, a small slip of paper with his signature on it and a formulaic injunction to the printer to do the job. It looked unimpressive until Herr Wesener explained that no printer would take on a job unless the copy came with such a slip of paper and that most of the printing presses in the country belonged to the Communist Party.

Even then, things could go wrong. My acquaintances among East German editors had a whole repertory of stories about changes made by overzealous proofreaders and mischievous compositors. One concerned a nature poem that had a line about a group of young birds: “Their heads nestward turned” (*Die Köpfe nestwärts gewandt*). By mistake or design, the compositor changed “nestward” to “westward,” and the proofreader, smelling heresy, covered himself by making it “eastward.”

Eventually the books reached readers, but not in the same fashion as in the West. The printers shipped the bound copies to a single storage facility in Leipzig, which serviced the entire country. They often sat in crates for months before they made it into stores, and their distribution did not correspond to demand, because there was no real literary market, no mechanism through which demand could make itself felt. Advertising did not exist, and there was little reviewing—usually only a few notices in the Party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, and literary reviews like *Sinn und Form*. Books were simply shipped to stores, where people stopped by to see what was on the shelves. They often took baskets at the door and filled them with whatever struck their fancy. I frequently saw them lined up before the cashier reading from their baskets the way Americans in supermarkets nibble from the food in their shopping carts. East Germany really was a “reading land,” I thought. But how did readers read?

Reading is a mystery everywhere. Psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers do not understand it when it takes place before their eyes; and historians have had a devilish time in sorting out its past. Although we cannot get inside the heads of readers, we have gathered a great deal of information about the circumstances that surround them. Most research has concentrated on texts, using notions of the implied reader, horizons of expectation, and rhetorical and typographical strategies.

To return once more to eighteenth-century France, the literature of the Enlightenment was notorious for developing hidden complicities between writers and readers, and these often served to circumvent censorship. Montesquieu put social criticism in the mouths of his falsely naive Persians. Voltaire projected her-

esies onto exotic settings—China, India, Eldorado, distant planets—that had an uncanny resemblance to France. And Diderot taught readers to find meaning between the lines, or even in the cross-references of his *Encyclopédie*. Thus the reference at the end of the article “Cannibalism” in volume 1: “See EUCHARIST.” And, at the end of “Eucharist,” “See CANNIBALISM.”

Did anything of this sort exist in East Germany? There at least the historian could interview readers from the old regime while their memories were fresh. In June 1990, I was invited to lecture on forbidden books in eighteenth-century France to the Pierckheimer Gesellschaft, a group of book collectors in Magdeburg. After the lecture, my hosts—mostly doctors, lawyers, and teachers—engaged in a lively discussion about the forbidden books of the GDR and how they had read them.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, they explained, it was dangerous to own works by authors like Freud and Nietzsche. But such books circulated through networks of trusted friends. A friend would appear with a volume and give you a time limit, often two days, to read it. You would shut yourself up in a safe place and pore over the text, day and night. The effect was overwhelming: “It cut into you like a knife,” said one of my hosts. By 1970, things had begun to ease. Coded want ads for the books appeared in the press, and tattered copies of them could be procured in certain cafés. Dissident authors of the current generation—Stefan Heym in *David*, Christa Wolf in *Kassandra*—got away with heresies by putting them in foreign settings, just as Montesquieu and Voltaire had done. And everyone learned to read between the lines.

Instead of concentrating on content, readers listened for tone, especially in poetry, and they kept a sharp eye out for typographical devices such as the alignment of letters at the beginning of lines, which sometimes spelled out a defiant message when read vertically. They did not read passively but scanned up and down the text, searching for gaps and irregularities that might be clues to hidden meanings. Often they compared texts, to see what had been cut or doctored and therefore was most worthy of attention. Three translations of Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* circulated, one from the GDR, one produced in the Soviet Union, and one rendered into German from an American edition. The East Germans scoured them all, hoping to pick up every possible nuance of destalinization at a time when they could not speak openly against Stalin at home.

They also knew all the famous missing passages of Christa Wolf’s *Kassandra*. The West Germans had published the full text of the book, while the East Germans put out a censored version with ellipsis dots in the place of the expurgated sections—presumably a concession to Wolf, who had enough influence to insist on special treatment by the censors. Some East Germans got hold of a Western copy, extracted the offending passages, and circulated them on slips of paper that could be inserted at the correct places. I was given a set of the inserts. After larding them into an East German copy of *Kassandra*, I found that the text sud-

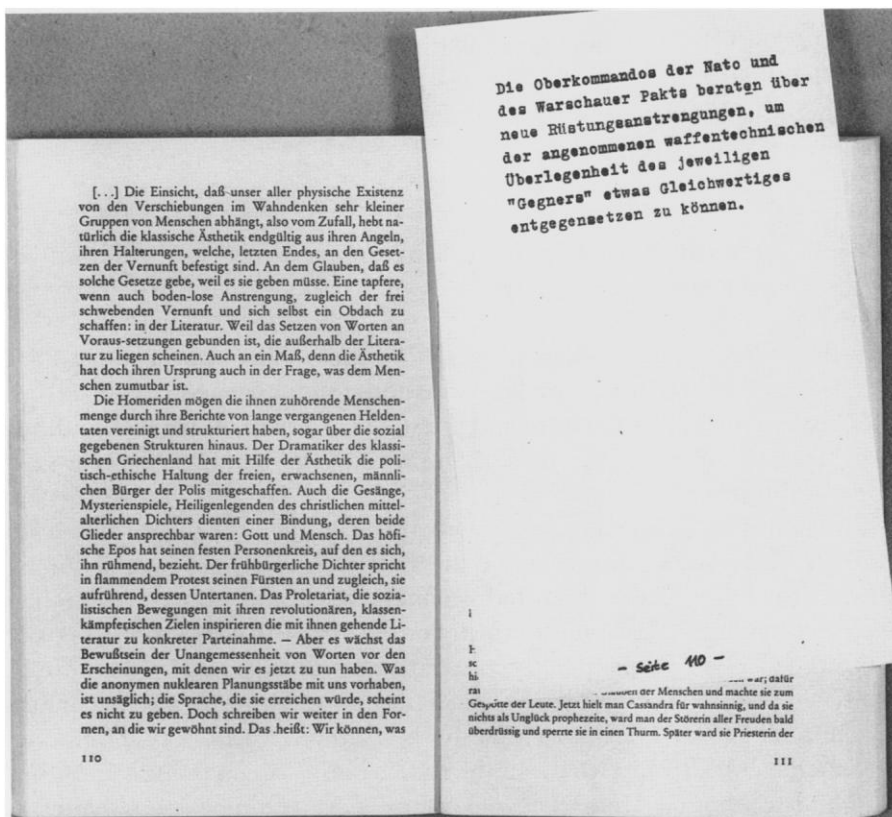


FIGURE 7.

denly came alive. Here, for example, is a sentence that had been purged from the top of page 110: "The supreme commanders of NATO and the Warsaw Pact are discussing new increases in armaments in order to be able to counter their 'opponent's' presumed superiority in weapons technology with something of equal strength" (fig. 7).<sup>18</sup> To a Western eye, this sentence looks surprisingly *unprovocative*. Even an East German might slip past it without noticing anything suspicious. But the typewritten insert highlights it in a manner that brings out an implicit message: the powers of destruction on both sides of the cold war are pursuing the same policies; both are bent on destroying the "opponent"—that is, they are morally equal, or equally immoral.

By these devices, the East Germans not only read between lines; they also controlled the meanings in the blank spaces. They read critically, aggressively, with a combination of sophistication and alienation unimaginable in the West,

even among our hardest deconstructors. To be sure, few East Germans reached the level of sophistication attained by the book lovers of Magdeburg. But everyone learned to look at official messages skeptically, even those who did nothing more than switch back and forth between East and West German broadcasts on their television sets.

Having examined censorship at work under these two very different old regimes, it remains to be seen whether we can arrive at any conclusions by comparing them.

First, of course, we must allow for the differences, both cultural and political. In eighteenth-century France, the book was the dominant medium of communication, except for word of mouth, and the state was relatively weak. Conditions were the opposite in the GDR: the *book* was weak (everyone watched television) and the state all-powerful.

But even within the single-party system, the censors in the GDR found areas of flexibility. As in France, there were really two systems, a rigid formal one and a pliable human one. Under both old regimes, the administrators of the book trade created enough cracks in their own bureaucracy for unorthodox books to seep into the reading public. Höpcke's vacant slots in the yearly plan were the functional equivalent of Malesherbes's tacit permissions. Some might claim that Höpcke himself was a modern-day Malesherbes, although I suspect he remained an apparatchik at heart. But whatever the similarities between their leaders, both book administrations confronted a similar tendency: permissiveness shaded off into laxity, and laxity led to scandals. *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* shook the East German system just as *De l'esprit* rocked the French. And in both cases, the book administrators rode out the shock waves in the same way—by bureaucratic hunkering down.

Of course censorship affected everyone involved with literature, not just the censors. It influenced the way writers wrote and readers read. It determined the relationship between writer and reader, and reader and text. And by doing so, it shaped the ways women and men made meaning. The making of meaning is a mysterious business, which historians are only beginning to understand and which can hardly be reduced to a formula like "reading between the lines." But authoritarian systems may contain a self-defeating element in their attempts to monopolize power: by controlling the means of communication, they provoke counterreactions and foster a critical turn of mind; they inadvertently teach skepticism and thereby undermine their own legitimacy.

So I do not think it adequate to orient the history of censorship around the truism that censors share a common task of eliminating heresies. Nor am I arguing that censorship should be understood as a thing-in-itself, an isolated phenomenon that is always and everywhere the same, the mere antithesis to freedom

of thought. My thesis is rather that censorship is an ingredient of authoritarian political cultures and that it varies in accordance with the system to which it belongs. The historian's task should be to uncover the organizing principles of those systems, and he or she can do so in some cases by studying them from the inside, from the viewpoint of the censors themselves. In the case of the Old Regime in France, censorship expressed the basic principle of *privilege*; in the case of the GDR, it was a matter of *planning*.

When seen from a comparative perspective, therefore, the history of censorship belongs to the history of culture and communication. It has its dramatic moments, its heroes and martyrs, but it generally takes place in obscure, gray areas where orthodoxy shades off into heresy and rough drafts harden into printed texts. Part of the history of censorship leads through the Bastille and the gulag, but most of it belongs to the critical zone of cultural contention, where the censor could become a collaborator of the author and the author an accomplice of the censor. We need to explore that zone, to understand it; and once we have found a way through its underbrush, we should gain a new appreciation of its great, towering monuments, such as *Areopagitica* and the First Amendment.

## Notes

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1. Jean Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1722), xxxvi.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
3. Abbé Geinos, 24 November 1750, Bibliothèque nationale Manuscrit Français (hereafter BN MS Fr.) 22137, fol. 103.
4. Report by Abbé Foucher, n.d., *ibid.*, fol. 90.
5. Report by Déguigneux, n.d., *ibid.*, fol. 135.
6. Report by Le Blond, 2 October 1752, BN MS Fr. 22138, fol. 38.
7. Report by Delaville, 23 November 1757, *ibid.*, fol. 19.
8. Report dated 17 January 1754, BN MS Fr. 22137, fol. 94.
9. Report by Rémond de St. Albine, 29 April 1751, BN MS Fr. 22138, fol. 78. As an example of an emphatically political and religious argument against granting a privilege, see the report by Bonamy of 18 December 1755, BN MS Fr. 22137, fol. 23.
10. Report by de Bougainville, 26 August 1751, BN MS Fr. 22138, fol. 33.
11. *Ibid.*
12. C. G. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, *Mémoires sur la librairie et sur la liberté de la presse* (1809, written in 1788; reprint, Geneva, 1969), 300 (page citation is to the reprint edition).
13. Among the general accounts of censorship under the Old Regime in France, see Nicole Herrmann-Mascard, *La censure des livres à Paris à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1968), a work that is heavily derived from an older study, J.-P. Belin, *Le commerce des livres prohibés à Paris de 1750 à 1789* (Paris, 1913). See also Robert Shackleton, *Censure and Censorship: Impediments to Free Publication in the Age of Enlightenment* (Austin, Tex. 1975); William Hanley, "The Policing of Thought: Censorship in Eighteenth-Century France," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 183 (1980): 265–95; and Daniel

- Roche, "La Censure," in *Histoire de l'édition française*, eds. Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier (Paris, 1984), 2:76–83. I have not been able to consult the thesis by Catherine Blangonnet, "Recherches sur les censeurs royaux et leur place dans la société au temps de Malesherbes (1750–1763)" (Ecole nationale des chartes, 1975).
14. Pierre Grosclaude, *Malesherbes: témoin et interprète de son temps* (Paris, 1961); Pierre Grosclaude, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et Malesherbes: documents inédits* (Paris, 1960).
  15. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* (Amsterdam, 1783), 2:53. I have not been able to confirm whether Mercier's report of this incident was accurate.
  16. D. Ozanam, "La disgrâce d'un premier commis: Tercier et l'affaire de *De l'esprit* (1758–1759)," *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes* 113 (1955): 140–70; and D. W. Smith, *Helvétius: A Study in Persecution* (Oxford, 1965).
  17. For a fuller description of the organization and functioning of the censorship office, see Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal 1989–1990* (New York, 1991), chap. 8.
  18. Christa Wolf, *Kassandra* (Berlin, 1987), 110.